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ABSTRACT

This is one in a series of eight discussion pamphlets produced by the Writing Across the Curriculum Project dealing with some of the issues connected with writing in the schools and their relation to learning. This pamphlet explores differences between students' talk and their writing in school contexts. It notes the value of expressive language--and talk--in dealing with new ideas and examines some of the things that can be done well in writing and not necessarily done at all in speech. (FI)

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FROM TALKING TO WRITING

by Peter Medway

with acknowledgements to the co-workers on the Project:
Nancy Martin, Harold Smith and Pat D'Arcy

The Schools Council and London University Institute of Education

Joint Project: Writing Across the Curriculum 11-13 Years

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The examples of children's talk and writing quoted in this pamphlet come from two schools the Project has worked with: Chelsea School, London, and Countesthorpe College, Leicestershire.

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Introduction

Of all the many reasons why writing goes on in schools, undoubtedly the main one is the belief that people must learn to write when children, because they will need to write when adults. Because this has seemed self-evident, writing has had an easy passage in schools: generally held to be a good thing, it hasn't had to justify its pervasive presence in diverse parts of the curriculum.

But this blanket approval is wearing thin: Midwinter* points out that plenty of adults don't in fact need to write, and individual teachers are coming to say that, whether or not writing is needed in adult life, *their* job is to teach science, history or whatever—not writing; so if writing is to stay in their bit of the curriculum, it will have to earn its keep by producing tangible pay-offs in terms of the learning of science etc., and not only in the learning of writing.

So it becomes necessary to face this question: if we leave aside the justification for writing now as a training for writing later, do we still, on other grounds, want children to write in school? The case now looks weaker.

If instead of 'writing' we said 'language activity', it would be different: support would be readily forthcoming. We now know how language can be crucial to learning and how the knowledge, information and experience which the child meets in school need to be gone over in his own language if they are to be understood. But when we say 'language' in this context, isn't it talking we tend to be thinking of? And isn't it talking rather than writing that presents itself as the obvious language mode for most learning situations?

* E. Midwinter, *Projections*, 1972.

The Case for Talk

The argument for talk as the essential and dominant medium of learning is powerful. One teacher, in discussion with a member of the Project, put it like this:

> Talk is very precious, isn't it. It's the thing that a lot of the kids really come to school for, the chatting round the table. In a way sometimes you really feel you're interfering and interrupting something that's very valuable . . . they're just chatting about the telly or whatever.
>
> Why is this whole Project called 'Writing across the Curriculum'? Why is it not 'Learning across the Curriculum'? . . . We give writing a hugely inflated place. It is *not* as important as children's talking, it is not as important in learning, I don't think, as talking is. It's a very artificial thing . . . If I have an idea or if I think about what I do, I do it either in talking or by thinking. The actual business of writing it down is totally irrelevant. I can see the business that it might well extend me if I did it. But it's not something that there is a pressure for.

It is indeed a great advantage of talk that it generally 'comes naturally'; and it's quite true that although as teachers we may preach the value of writing, our behaviour suggests this belief doesn't go very deep: in *our* dealings with knowledge, information and experience we *don't* habitually resort to writing.

THE CASE OF DAVID

One of us talked to a thirteen-year-old boy, David, in the second year of a comprehensive school, a boy who was unusually conscious of the processes which were contributing to his education. He was an intelligent boy with an impressive range of knowledge and a keen desire to learn. Yet whereas he understood well, and could explain the way talking helped him to learn, he saw no educational value in the process of writing.

Interviewer But don't you find that when you're writing you put things down in a different way than you could if you're talking?

David I think that talking brings out more things in you than just writing it down on a piece of paper. I mean you write it down to show the teacher that you've done it but it doesn't bring out any more knowledge in you, I don't think. Well, just getting a piece of paper, saying, oh, I'll write this all down, you know, and just to show the teacher that you've done it and he just ticks it and you've done that bit of work. I think that you, if you just got a book out and read it all through and you told the teacher you'd read the book that should be enough instead of saying, OK David, you've done the book, right, now get a piece of paper and write all about the book, I think that . . .

Interviewer Yes, I can see that. There's no point in writing down what you know but what about writing down your ideas? You haven't got them in a book but they're about things in the book. Now suppose you . . .

David I think you could do that, you could do that in taped discussion do that. A taped discussion.

Interviewer Just to say what you think more easily.

David Yes, rather than writing it down, because you have to write it in words when you write it down, but say it out. It comes out of you when you're speaking, it just . . . Writing it down takes you half an hour to think what you're doing and in taped discussion you're put on a spot and you can say all about it.

'Talking brings out more things in you': partly because it's less laborious—you can 'get through' a lot more in half an hour's talk than you can in half an hour's writing—and partly because it makes you come out with things you didn't know you knew, or

generate completely new thoughts (by contrast with writing, which, he says, 'doesn't bring out any more knowledge in you'). The reason you think when you're talking is, he says, because 'you're put on a spot': that is, your interlocutor makes demands of you, challenges your statements, making you reconsider or clarify them; sometimes he selects the ground you have to operate on, brings in considerations you hadn't previously taken account of and forces you to accommodate them in your thinking. This situation, although demanding for all the reasons mentioned, nevertheless, David feels, produces a relatively *painless* flow of thought: the mental processes seem to look after themselves, and, without much conscious effort, 'you can say all about it'. Writing, on the other hand, is characterised by none of these advantages: mechanical and pedestrian, it gropes along in the dark, with no-one else to help it along in its progression from thought to thought.

So David feels, and we can go along with a lot of it. But mightn't these aids and supports which talk affords sometimes become constraints? Constraints from which *writing* might offer a release?

The Case for Writing

Consider the activity of writing and what it involves, and the points in the education process where it might, by virtue of its distinctive features, be expected to fulfil a need. We can start by thinking of the obverse of David's *pro*-talk points.

'It comes out of you when you're speaking'. Yes—sometimes—but talk has no sooner come than it has gone again. It is evanescent, and this places a severe limit—a limit connected with the duration of short-term memory—on the coherence and organisation one can give to an extended passage of thinking. While the process involved in writing is similar in one basic respect, that language comes up continuously in the mind and the thought is constantly moving on, it is also different in that a record is left of what has passed—footprints in the sand, if you like. As a

result, the writer can at any point stop and look back to see where he has come from and get his bearings. He can inspect how the whole construction is getting on, what parts are complete and what remains to be done, what the balance looks like, whether it is consistent, whether it stays on the point, whether anything has been left hanging in the air. On scanning back he can sometimes see connections between things he has said which he was not aware of when he said them, and this may modify what he goes on to say. When he pauses he can put himself in the position of a reader, in order to judge the effectiveness of the communication and give himself some feedback.

But in any case what David says isn't always true. It doesn't always come out of you when you're speaking. It may be *hard* to say something—for a variety of reasons: people differ greatly in their ability to talk in different contexts; the particular social situation may be inhibiting; what one has to say may not have reached a degree of clarity which allows it to be put into words at speed and off the cuff; or may be complicated and involve intricate argument or the deployment of facts and figures.

Writing provides the leisure to search for the best way of saying what you mean. It is of course true that in expressive *talk* a speaker may sometimes generate a variety of alternative ways of saying something and say them one after the other, peppering round the target-meaning with a hail of near-misses; and it may not matter (if your audience is undemanding and sympathetic to your efforts) that everything you say—both what you mean and what you don't mean—'goes out' and can't be taken back. Writing nevertheless *extends* one's power to find the right words. A variety of alternatives may come up in succession in the mind but then a promising one can be written down. It is now in the bag and can't get away, and one can securely continue the search: something better may suggest itself, in which case the first idea can be cancelled; if not, it is there to go back to. What seems the best formulation at the time may not look so good when seen in the light of what one finds oneself saying later: one can go back and change it. What one really wants to say can finally be pulled clear of the debris of rejected words and phrases, and, when 'run through' by the reader (or by the writer as his own reader), will

flow like silver-tongued speech, displaying no sign of the mess and sweat of its making.

'You're put on a spot', David says. In other words, the demands made by the person you are talking to make you say clearly what you mean and make you justify your ideas. True: but as we've already suggested, in some stages of one's thinking such demands may be more than one can cope with. Some spots are too hot. One may want to be very exploratory; the thought one is formulating or the line one feels oneself getting on to may be so tenuous or so fragile that at the slightest interruption it will be lost; and the other person's concerns will rarely be quite on all fours with yours; he may sidetrack you, or merely fail to pick up the point you want to follow.

It may be seen as an argument against the use of writing for exploratory or tentative thinking that the written utterance is more 'weighty' than talk, in that what is written is 'on record' in a way that spoken words are not. On the other hand, if you're not going to show your writing to anybody, or only to someone you don't feel anxious about, you can say what you like without fear that you'll be held accountable for it. The absence of an immediate audience can be liberating. You can try out ideas or comments—to see what they feel like, or because you think they are probably right but you want to be sure before you utter them in public. And you can write private things or things which hardly anyone else would be interested in, purely to resolve something for yourself. And you can say things in writing which would, if you spoke them, sound pretentious or inconsistent with your habitual social role (a role which, in the case of a school pupil, may reflect restrictive peer group norms).

Finally, two points about writing which David doesn't touch on.

First, in writing you can take on a fictional role and explore situations from another person's point of view. (You can in drama too, of course—but in rather different ways). Or, without going to the extent of an overtly fictional role, you can try alternative possible stances for yourself. (So you can in normal social inter-

course: but beyond certain limits you will be considered to be insincere or to have lost touch with reality). This is another way writing can provide a 'low-risk' situation.

Secondly, it is above all in writing that language can be used for artistic purposes. The spoken language in our culture does allow, to a certain rather limited extent, for the poetic function, particularly in the recreation and shaping of experience in story-telling. But most of the modes of poetic statement available to us depend on writing. In education, language enables the initial uncovering and the tentative examination of new ideas, thoughts and feelings to be carried forward to a definition, or a synthesis, or a provisional conclusion, in two ways: by the attainment of a *theoretical* level in the discursive organisation of thought, or of a *poetic* level in the symbolic or non-discursive mode. The latter certainly is likely to depend on a mastery of the process of writing.

All this amounts to a good *prima facie* case for writing in education. It's a good case, at least, if you accept that schools need to make provision for thinking to go on above ground, which for the most part means in language. Of course, there are those pupils who will do very well by just thinking–they're the ones who have done very well in the past. But what they've been doing inside their heads others manifestly haven't been doing, and it's the latter who we have to take deliberate action to help. Getting them to talk and write is part of the answer to the problem of enabling them to think, since these processes *involve* thinking and yet, unlike the 'pure', chin-on-fist type of thinking, may be got going and kept going in all sorts of ways and with all sorts of different motivations and reasons.

If that's accepted, the next step is to see that there are things that need to happen (sorts of 'thinking'–using that term to mean a wide range of mental processes) that can't be expected to happen in talk. The reasons why they can't, really reduce themselves to two: 'too complex' or 'socially impracticable'. 'Too complex': there are meanings which can't be expressed in talk because you can't hold enough in your head to get a coherent organisation (this holds of both transactional and poetic language). 'Socially impracticable': there are things one can't say because

one doesn't say that sort of thing–not necessarily because it's *inconceivable* that one should say it but maybe just because the social contexts one finds oneself in don't lend themselves naturally to it. Telling a fictional story, playing a role, going over something others wouldn't care to hear about, saying things that might get mocked, or ignored–these are situations in which you mightn't feel happy to use talk.

On considering the potential contribution of writing, one is forced to the conclusion that the current disenchantment is due less to the lack of a good case for writing than to the fact that we haven't been very good at it: we haven't succeeded on a big scale in getting kids into writing–certainly not the ones who would most benefit from the use of such overt language processes.

So in the remainder of this paper we turn our attention to that: how do we get children to be able to write? We're not thinking at this point of the problem of the child who can hardly write words at all, serious though that also is, but of the large number of those who are literate but don't write to any effect or with any satisfaction–like David.

Strikingly aware of the strengths of talk, David had failed to discover those of writing. His experience of writing had evidently not given him any glimpse of the enhanced powers he might enjoy with its aid. On the contrary, for him writing represented a *reduction* of his powers. When he turned to writing the gift of tongues was withdrawn: the resources which made him a fluent and effective talker were suddenly rendered unavailable.

There is surely something very surprising about this state of affairs–one which affects many others besides David. After all, the part of the operation which one would suppose to be most difficult, and the almost universal achievement of which is so remarkable, is the capacity to say things *at all*, in whatever form: to come up with language and think in the open with words. Yet this is the part that *everyone* can do (apart from brain-damaged people and other obvious exceptions). By the side of this impressive competence which has already been achieved by all school-age children, the special difficulties of this or that *mode*

of language look trifling. With writing one would expect some problems—but one would expect it would be the psychomotor process and the 'coding' that would give the trouble. But this obstacle too David and others like him have already surpassed.

The *extra* problem involved in becoming a motivated writer for someone who *can* talk and *can* write (in the narrower sense) one might expect to be easily surmounted—indeed, the progression might almost be expected to occur of its own accord. One is led to wonder whether what ought to be happening fairly naturally is for some reason being *prevented*. Could it be that, far from failing (despite valiant efforts) to get children to achieve something difficult, we are unwittingly stopping them from doing something easy?

From Talking to Writing

In order for children to make the transition from talking, which they can do, to writing, which we want them to, two conditions will have to be met—or so one would suppose. The 'writing situation' will have to be close enough to a familiar task situation for the same skill, the same knowing how to go about it, to be operable; and yet the writing must produce for the writer some benefit or satisfaction which he couldn't equally have achieved by the less laborious process of talking.

We said before that writing has the advantage over talking in two sorts of situations. In both those situations writing would be felt by the writer to be of distinctive and special usefulness. But one of them—the structuring of complex thought—is perhaps unattainable by any but *experienced* writers: you're doing something which *hasn't got an equivalent* in talk, and you can only even get a sense of the possibility of doing it when you're well inside the special world of the written language.

So it must be the other type of situation we rely on to provide the satisfactions which will enable children to see the point of writing: that is, writing to do things which aren't *theoretically*

impossible in talk but which social constraints and habitual ways of behaving work against. And here we must record that in infants and junior schools many children are in fact turned on to writing this way—by writing stories, and things about themselves and what they've done and what they've seen, which are quite like the spoken language in their expressiveness and general feel, but which it would perhaps be unusual to find actually *spoken* by a child. The satisfaction for the writer lies not in the attainment of complexity but in the opportunity to work out what he wants to say and savour it as he goes without having to concern himself with the demands of a *present* audience.

In that sort of situation the child can use all the skill and knowledge he has gained in thousands of spoken transactions. He's doing in writing something which does at least resemble the sort of thing he knows people do in talk. He is still using language to perform a relatively familiar function.

Whose Purposes Does Writing Serve?

But consider how David sees the function of the written language. It's very noticeable how, whilst he sees talk as meeting *his own* needs--helping him to think, showing him how much he knows, increasing his knowledge by 'bringing more out of him'—writing merely meets the *teacher's* needs: specifically, the need to evaluate what has been learnt: a reasonable requirement, no doubt, but one which doesn't get the pupil any further. So writing for him serves a function remote from the normal functions of most (familiar) language: one explicable only in terms of the institutionalised procedures of schools, and one irrelevant to his own learning needs.

Is his problem with writing, then, *not* the psychomotor skill, *not* any difficulty with the vocabulary or structure of the written language, but the unfamiliarity and apparent futility of the use he is called on to put it to?

A look at another case may be helpful at this point.

A SECOND CASE: CHRIS

Chris (aged fifteen, same school) also objects to the normal run of school writing and can't bring himself to do it. For him as for David, writing to show others what you already know you know is an unmotivating assignment. Specifically he objects to the sort of answers required on worksheets. But, unlike David, Chris is a writer: he frequently and by his own choice writes poems and imaginative documentaries. But, interestingly enough, he tends to do so only in sociology, where he isn't really supposed to, and not in English, where he is and where 'stimuli' (such as photographs) are presented to him for that express purpose. 'The thing is with those photos', he says, 'so many people have done them before. So that you feel yours will just get thrown on the pile, and probably some that are better'. What he is usually called on to write in sociology is short answers setting out information acquired. Instead, Chris chooses to invest the information with personal meaning and to create an experience rather than transmit (re-transmit) facts with his words.

Here is an example of what he wrote after looking at a picture of old Leicester in a teacher-produced pamphlet. Notice the adventurous and experimental spirit in his use of language: isn't this to be seen in the light of his strong feeling that it's his *own* piece of work, undertaken for *his* satisfaction?

> *What does a pictorial look of 17th century Leicester show?*
> Who would have recognised the shabby state of what was to become of the ground, that of the popular site of the clock tower.
>
> The ground was cold, the hard-worn pebble stones lay, matching like a jigsaw, brown and old, streets separated, the black-brown finish was the stone face of life. The smell and dirt of a booming industry, spread around settling like rot. The tarnished city welcomed a face lift, this was to happen in due time, still life went on.
>
> The brick-work was choc-a-bloc, crammed to its limits. Windows were square, wooden frames lived between them, tarnished glass, eyes to the centre windows were small as many as 20 smaller panes of glass enclosed at the frames.

The windows being supported by vertical, onend bricks, these outstanding from the rest. The main structure of the building going horizontal. The large baywindows looked out to the front, showing off its area of glass and mass supports, many intricate and finely detailed. The wood finish gave the finishing touch.

The idea of adding a coat of paint to the house was never thought of. Money was small and very little was felt. There were far more important things to buy. Brown, black, grey the colours of the environmental waste and fumes of the not-so-far-away industry.

Letters, words and signposts hung everywhere the direct method of promoting products of the many. Employers names looking outward to the eyecatcher. To live you had to make money and the only way to do this, is to show and let everyone know what and who you are.

Stone slabs round the edge of the buildings. Curbs being flat, straight, the object of the rectangle. The gaps between bricks described the state of living, dark, small, unclean, infinite ending, the manufactured brick described poverty.

Chris talked about his writing with his teacher and a member of the Project team (PM). Here is part of the conversation.

Teacher	Do you like showing it [your writing] to people?
Chris	If it's different from everybody else's, but if it's the same it's pointless. I mean I wouldn't have shown you these if it were just full of answers like everybody else's. It's different.
PM	What do you think about writing down just factual answers? What's your attitude?
Chris	You've not got the feeling there for it. Unless you go into real detail.
Teacher	What do you mean though, you haven't got the feeling?
Chris	Well, the pamphlet's just missed a word and you say do this and write it and you move on to the next page, you've just passed it like that, whereas . . .

PM	It's had no effect on you, no impact.
Chris	Yes. If you write poems and this that and the other, you've got a wider scope and you feel as if you've done something. You've learnt something, you know.
Teacher	You said, if you have just done your task there, and you've gone through it, you wouldn't have got the feeling.
Chris	I wouldn't.
Teacher	What feeling?
Chris	As if you're not part of it, as if you're just a schoolkid and it's doing reams of work. Whereas, if you do it this way, you're doing something creative as well as putting the fact down.
Teacher	So if you're just a schoolkid that's sitting there doing some work, you don't learn, really.
Chris	No. It depends what sort of person you are.
Teacher	But *you* wouldn't.
Chris	I mean I'd sooner write this way. I don't think I could just put one-word answers in. That wouldn't mean anything to me.

What David gets from talking, Chris gets from his sort of poetic writing–namely, the feeling that 'you've learnt something': you've moved on a bit by doing it, you've added something to your understanding. The crucial distinction for him seems to be between, on the one hand, imposed tasks and, on the other, situations where he feels he is saying what he wants to say. For him and for David language flows when they feel they are making a genuine communication–as opposed to a phoney one for someone who doesn't want what you're giving him but merely wants to check up on whether you *can* give it. The normal use of language, after all, the one they've been familiar with outside school, *is* for making real communications; but the implicit complaint of both boys is that school doesn't seem to call for writing to be used for that purpose, the one that it's (in their experience) really for, but is restricted to a special role intelligible only in terms of

the way schools go about organising and assessing learning.

A THIRD CASE: NIGEL & GERALD

Several second year classes in a London comprehensive school went out in small groups for a number of mornings to look at the local area. On one occasion, a class made a taped report on returning to school. The situation was relatively formal: the teacher opened the tape with an announcement and called on the boys one by one to report. Despite what could have been a slightly intimidating context, the reports were fluent and lively, combining the expression of interest and often excitement at what had been discovered with precise information about streets, dates, buildings and so on. Reporting developed into discussion, which eventually focussed on a matter which had particularly engaged some of them—the lives of the old people in the area and their feelings about being asked questions by groups of twelve-year-old boys.

But the *writing* that came out of the expeditions was undoubtedly of less interest. It confined itself on the whole to factual report, tended to be short and disconnected, expressed little of the interest and enjoyment that the boys actually felt and failed to set the observations (as the talk had done) in a framework of the meaning and significance the writers attached to them. Somehow the facts they had *talked* about with concern and involvement, in the writing became mere facts, dead information. The expression of excitement isn't necessarily of great value, but it was characteristic of the talk that such expression went hand in hand with a more powerful and purposeful organisation of the information.

Nigel, one of the abler writers in one of the other classes which went out, wrote a number of short accounts about his expeditions with his friend, Gerald. The following piece by him is fairly typical of the sort of thing written by most of the boys—though many didn't have even this subdued sense of involvement (detectable perhaps in the last sentence):

Greater London Council Ambulance Service was built in 1969. Before it was built for them there was a place called the Red Cross. The red Cross was made into a private service for all over the country. But even before that there was a place called the Cadogan Iron Foundry. There is a peculiar pipe system in the building now, it is a heating system. The pipes come from the RAF runway which they used these pipes for burning lots of paraffin to clear the fog and so the planes can see the runway.

We don't want to say that this is a failure as a piece of writing, merely that it seems meagre and constricted when compared with the talk that was going on—talk which was motivated and expansive, which went into details, made arguments, speculated, looked for reasons, and conveyed the sort of investment the boys had in the inquiry they were undertaking.

Why did the qualities of the talk not carry over into the writing? One of us asked Nigel and Gerald about talking and writing. We had quite a long conversation of which we here give some excerpts.

PM	You were telling me earlier that you go out into Fulham . . .
Nigel	Chelsea.
PM	It's Chelsea, is it, and do investigations and come back. Now when you come back do you have to write about it then?
Nigel	Oh yes, because otherwise it's just like going off of school and just going out, it wouldn't be worth having a school then. So you've really got to come back and do some work. It's a bit boring then.
PM	It's boring?
Nigel	Yes. When you have to write about it.
PM	Yes. Can you give me any idea why it's boring?
Gerald	Well, you already know what it is and sir says write about that, and all you're writing it for really is so when you're doing something else, you

want to look back—you most probably know anyway—you look back in your book and it's got it down there.

This is the sort of mystified view of school work which many children hold: the tasks are right and proper, very necessary and—completely pointless. Notice that Nigel sees the only possible usefulness of the writing as for making a record—a record he'll never use. Like David, he sees the process of writing as one which adds nothing to what he has already.

The interviewer made the point to them that when they came back from an expedition they wouldn't object to *telling* people about it. In fact, they would most likely *want* to tell people—it wouldn't be a burden at all. So why should writing about it be? Wasn't that the same sort of thing?

Nigel Well, when you tell someone, you don't you sort of put it more in your own words, but when you write about it you've got to think of the same thing that happened.

Nigel seems to be saying that in writing it's necessary to confine yourself strictly to the facts. Gerald seems to pick up this meaning:

Gerald Yes, if someone tells you something you've got to put their words down. [Presumably he's thinking of reporting on an interview.] If you're telling anything, anyone, you can sort of put a little bit in to make it more exciting if something's happened to you.

Nigel Say that if you're writing about say a factory, right, and you had these old pipings in it from a certain place, well to the other person you'd tell them that, right, and you could add in all the other bitses about what you did over there, but when you do your story you can only . . . write down . . . you can only say that you saw the piping and what it was used for. [By 'story' he seems to mean simply 'account'.]

Nigel takes it for granted that writing in a situation like this has to be *transactional* writing, which operates a particular criterion of relevance: namely that if it's about 'the subject' it's relevant and if it's about you it's not. Yet the characteristics of this sort of writing are not seen by him as what they really are, a rational means which has been evolved for fulfilling certain specialised ends–i.e. as the answer to such considerations as a reader's need to get systematically arranged information about Chelsea, and nothing but that. Rather, he sees them as a matter of propriety. It is a case of 'this is how it's done'. For some reason it has come about that these boys feel the 'correct' or appropriate form of writing to be the one typically employed in books for making needed information available to readers. But their own situation and needs aren't that at all. Their need at this point is surely not to pass on their data to someone else who needs to know it, but to reflect on it and find significance in it for themselves. That's what they were doing in their talk. They were informing each other as well, of course, but their criterion of relevance was mainly personal: in other words, a speaker selected what to say on the basis of what he found significant, and not according to the imagined needs of some hypothetical ignorant listener, one moreover whose purpose in wanting the information remained obscure.

A bit later, Nigel added:

Nigel	Yes, you can't really have [i.e. in your writing] much more than what you've really seen, you know, and what's to do with Enquiry. [Enquiry: the name of the school subject in which this took place.]
Gerald	If you're telling it to friends, like say Brian in that class, you say, cor blimey we had a smashing time, smashing loads of milk bottles. You can say it to your friends but you can't really write it down, can you?
PM	Supposing you weren't smashing milk bottles, suppose you didn't do anything wrong, but you still said, Cor, we had a smashing time, it was great up there–you wouldn't write that down?

Gerald Well no, because it just wouldn't seem right, you know, you're writing, 'we climbed over the pipes to look at them and it really was great, you know. It was rather fun, you know'.

(Omission)

Gerald You could say, 'we had a very nice time', something like that.

Nigel Yes, 'very nice time'.

The Power of Unspoken Conventions

But they still haven't really said what makes the difference. Why is it that when they tell someone about it they will convey the whole experience, but when they write it they reduce it to the bare facts, censoring out three quarters of their response? Nigel now tells us what for him is the crucial distinguishing feature of the writing situation.

PM Why wouldn't you write it down as you would say it?

Nigel I don't know, it just doesn't sound right, because no-one's going to read it and you just—like a waste of time. You know, it's not worth writing down what nobody's going to read.

PM But in that case there's no point in writing anything. [i.e. whereas apparently you *do* find some point in writing down the facts.]

Nigel Well, only what you see, you know, just your work, and that's about it.

When he says 'no-one's going to read it', he doesn't mean that literally: he knows very well that his teacher will certainly read it. The striking thing is that that doesn't seem to count as someone reading it, presumably because the *unspoken convention* of such school writing is that it should purport to be addressed not to the person who is actually going to read it (the teacher) but to a

hypothetical public audience (about which nobody has any illusions that it exists); or perhaps not to an audience at all—the writer is just 'writing it down', rather than writing to or for someone. The teacher's position in this transaction between pupil and x, or pupil and no-one, tends to be that of onlooker rather than addressee: he watches how the pupil handles himself in relation to his imaginary public audience, and comments, as it were, from the outside.

Now, a child who is an accomplished writer may in fact be able to write from his school desk in a way which is entirely appropriate for a 'public audience': such writing really could go out into the world and stand on its own and make sense to any interested reader as a genuine communication. What the child who can do this has mastered is not so much certain forms of language as an understanding of the sort of relationship which necessarily obtains between a writer and a set of readers who are not known to him but who do now know something of him. The less mature writer has to proceed without that understanding and is reduced to 'putting on' the voice he hears in such writing. He can only mimic the surface features of the language instead of operating creatively from a real sense of the requirements of an unknown reader. Often all that a child has to go on is a vague awareness of the inexplicit requirements of a teacher who, although he is to be the only actual reader, nevertheless apparently may not be addressed in the writing. (Such writing we would place in the audience category: 'pupil to teacher as examiner'.)

Where such a situation obtains it is seldom the result of the teacher's consciously setting out to make it so. Nor is it a sign that the teacher *as a person* is seen by the child as anything but friendly and sympathetic. Rather it seems that this set of assumptions is just in the 'educational' air: seldom examined, it is unconsciously held by the participants in all writing situations where 'facts' are involved— unless a *deliberate* decision is taken to fight against it. It is unlikely that the teacher of Nigel and Gerald ever explained to them that he wanted them to exclude the expression of personal attitudes in their writing. Indeed, he would almost certainly have held the opposite view that signs of interest and involvement were all to the good. Moreover, he was

interested in their writing. He responded to it in a *personal* way and showed them unmistakably that he valued it. He was not seen by the boys as an intimidating figure—on the contrary. They felt they could relax with him, they liked him and they said on the tape that they thought they were lucky to be taught by him. Yet despite all this they never questioned their assumption that their writing for him had to operate under all sorts of constraints which did not affect their talk with him or any other aspect of their relationship. Presumably part of the reason is that in the absence of other models they take their notions of writing from whatever relevant adult writing they meet—in this case, probably, the transactional writing of information books, magazines, newspapers, guidebooks, etc.

It is not surprising that Nigel and Gerald were unable to draw on what they *can* do in language if they see the task as writing for no real purpose and no real audience in a way that results in no advance over the knowledge and understanding they had when they started. But, fortunately, they don't see all writing situations that way. In another context, Nigel feels that his writing performs a real function and provides his reader with something the reader does not already have. And here the adult models he has come across are more helpful: they show him a way of structuring his content that enables him to utilise, instead of forcing him to leave behind, the language of his speech—its rhythms, its expressiveness, its way of putting things. At home with the language he is using, he is not at a loss for what to say. His communication turns out to be effective, and, indeed, capable potentially of speaking to a wide and unknown readership. This poem arose out of the same series of excursions into the surrounding area, and was written for the same teacher. (Spelling corrected.)

Age

Poor old dearie
Down Dunn Road,
She don't have no fun

Nothing I can do,
Says every known being
They don't care a damn

She tries her best
not to moan,
But she has to

Some things are hard
Some things aren't
She don't care.

Here she comes
all dressed up,
Snigger! all in rags.

Look how they pass her,
Not saying a word,
In their mind it's, OLD HAG

She's going to tell me
Something now.
What can it be?

THANK GOODNESS
FOR THAT

She hates all the old,
She don't mind the young,
She likes the young ones.

I don't mind her.
Does she like me?
That remains to be seen.

She's going shopping,
She can't afford much,
Enough to keep her alive.

How much longer,
Can she live,
poor old soul

"What yer looking at, eh!"
"Nothing mam,"
She's going

It Feels Like Him Speaking

The reason Nigel is able to accomplish this successfully, and in a way that uses the language skill that he has, is likely to be that it

represents an extension and modification and extra shaping of the way he habitually speaks, and not an operation on alien territory. When he was a talker it came out and he could say it: he could say what he wanted to say and he found himself *with* something to say—the two come together. Though now a writer, he still feels himself to be in that situation—and this because he has developed sufficiently as a writer to make a verbal construct which he *couldn't* have produced in any talking situation. He has entered the special world of writing and got far enough in to be experiencing 'ways of saying' which have no reflection in the world of talk: nevertheless he has been able to take his familiar equipment with him. His strength is that, although he has here produced a piece of language he would never have uttered in speech, *it still feels to him like him speaking*, not someone else: not some assumed persons or put-on voice forced on him by the need to say these things or cope with this situation. It is relevant that he feels free, because of the climate the teacher has created, to write in the grammar of his own speech, a grammar which, incidentally, is not 'bad English' but the dialect of a speech community comprising several million native Londoners. (Being urban and thriving doesn't stop it being a dialect: dialects don't *have* to be gasping their last breath in the mutterings of an ancient thatcher somewhere out in the sticks.)

Growth from the Expressive

Here then is a school writer working his way into the poetic function by a process of refinement and selection on a strongly established base of *expressive* language. If he continues to develop in this way, his language will retain its life and its purposefulness even though the form will get more specialised. It is likely that the best *transactional* writing also develops this way, gradually advancing from the expressive with lines of communication kept open—rather than taken on fully formed from new models unrelated to one's past language experience.

However, in this paper our concern is not how we may get children to the stage of mature poetic and transactional writing

but how we can get them to write at all in any way that enables them to experience the usefulness and satisfaction of writing. The attainment of the differentiated functions of mature writing is another problem: many children don't even get to first base.

A FOURTH CASE: JOHN

John, who was engaged on the same project as Nigel and Gerald, wrote extensively. For whatever reason, he felt able to use writing in the way David said he could use talking. He did not see it as a laborious and artificial process–he enjoyed it. John's relationship with his teacher was an especially good one, and this may have been important in freeing him from anxieties about his writing which he might otherwise have felt. (John said of his teacher, 'I know him and I know what he's like. He's a good man, and he's got the same feelings as me'.) About writing he said:

> . . . if I wrote it down, I mean, don't miss anything, just keep thinking, you know what I mean, but when you talk you tend to stutter, you know what I mean, and lose your words and that, you know, things like this.
>
> When I write things down, all the time I think to myself, oh, it's good, you know what I mean? It's great when I write this down.

John feels things strongly and has a lot to say: he talks readily and is an important person in class discussions. His problem seems to be that he has *more* to say than he can easily cope with in talk; and also perhaps that he sometimes wants to say things which the language of his peer group is not accustomed to carrying. The result is that his speech, while forceful and animated, is full of false starts, breaks, fillers to give him a breather while he thinks, and phrases which perhaps disclose an uneasiness about his exposed position in saying unconventional things. Writing apparently provided him with a relief from the aspects of talking that he found uncomfortable.

John spoke in the discussion that was taped and later wrote about what had struck him on his investigations in the area. Here

is one of the things he said in the discussion. It illustrates both the sort of things he is prepared to say and the pressure he finds himself under in trying to think at the same time as he communicates:

> The old lady, I mean the old people, they like the young kids to come along and that and have a talk with them because they know that we we we we we care for them, you know what I mean, and we like them, you know what I mean, and this is why they're happy, but when we've gone, like this lady who we met last week, we just, we was having a nice chat, she was happy, you know what I mean, telling about her, well afterwards she was she was all on her own, you know what I mean, lonely, and just, you know what I mean, unwanted, just like that.

To conclude, here is John's writing. It is expressive writing. Facts, observations and information are all there and are effectively communicated but the drive behind this flow of explanation, comment and speculation is a strong *interest* in the topic; and the situation which enables him to talk it out on paper is the availability of a trusted audience. (It appears that he begins by writing 'bare facts' and *becomes* involved as he gets into it.)

It is actually two pieces of writing, done on separate days. Spelling and punctuation have been corrected to make it easier to read.*

> After the war the Germans came over to Britain and built Fulham Gasworks. With it they built a square called the German square. Now it is called Imperial Square. In the Square there are gas lamps and they are still working. They still have gas in them. Some people said that the gasworks

* Readers may wonder what the uncorrected version looked like. Here are the first few lines in the original:

> After the war the Germans came over to britain and built Fulham Gas Works with it they built A square called the German square now it is called imperial square in the square there are Gas laps and they are still working they still have Gas in them. Some people said that the Gas works might be pulled down all along Micheal Rd + Harwood Rd the houses are going to be pulled down

might be pulled down. All along Michael Road and Harwood Road the houses are going to be pulled down because they are going to build a flyover. The old lady in No. 9 Imperial Square said that she doesn't care if they are going to knock down the house because she has had her happy days and now she is old and she is no longer wanted. No-one loves her. Her house has been standing for a hundred years. All the houses in Imperial Square have been standing up for a long time. The people there complain about the supporters come through Imperial Square and they smash bottles and other bad things. This lady said that when the Germans were there it was very hard to get a job. You had to get up very early to queue up to get a job in the power station. It must have been very hard for the people. They might have to wait about six hours before the gates open, then they might not still get a job. I would not like to been in those days. I bet their houses were running with rats. They had no food hardly, their clothes were dirty, they were dirty, they had diseases. It must have been terrible for them. I felt sorry for the lady who we was talking to. It must have been hard for her. People from everywhere came to the Gasworks to get a job. Where my friend lives, his name is Leslie, at the end of his street called Elb Street there is a place there, it has gas there, they put it in the lorries. That has been standing for about a hundred years, and Langford School, that was built in 1889. I used to go there and my brothers went there. I like that school. I will remember that school. Lots of old ladies must have memories but if they tell you they might think that we think the things they are saying to us is silly. It is sad for some of the old people. Their husbands have died in the war and now they have no-one to talk to. They are all alone but this is life. No-one can live for ever. It's very sad. Where I live in Pearscroft Road there is a place called Bulow Court. Before that was built there was a road going through there called Bulow Road. There must be something done about these old people. I don't know what but something.

5 February 1973

I was walking down Townmead Road and I saw a church. It

was called St Michael's Church. It had a little stone on the side of it. It had some words. It said, To the glory of God this stone was laid by Lady IDA DAZZELL, March 23 1899. And in Bronten Road some of the houses are going to be knocked down because the new flyover is going to be built. Quite a lot of houses are going to have to be knocked down. Some old houses are really bad. They have cracked walls, windows smashed and people still live there, but some are good. Some people paint their old houses and they come up very nice. All the houses in Imperial Square are very well done up. They have nice and tidy gardens. It looks really good and it would be a shame to knock these down. I hope these people will put up a fight to keep these houses up. They could get all the people there to demonstrate, make a fight. They really must do something to keep the houses up. The old people do not mind all that much because they're too weak to fight and like I said before they have had their happy days. And along Townmead Road the houses are going to be knocked down again because of the flyover. One of the boys in our class, his is going to be knocked down. His name is Derek Pinder. Some old people like young boys to come up to them and have a chat with them. They think 'Ah, this is nice of them to come up to us and say hello. I don't know why they talk to us, we're just boring old ladies that get on their nerves'. These are the things they think about. Young boys like to talk to old people. They have so much to say about themselves, about when they were little children. I went up to a man. I asked him if he liked London. He said that he loved London. He had lived in London all his life. He was ninety years old. He looked a bit upset, I don't know what about. I asked him if it was hard to get a job when he had left school. He said that when he left school they would do just odd jobs, go around asking if they wanted any help with their shopping or do shopping for them. They could find lots of things to do, but they would not get a lot. When they had got a little bit older it was very hard. Everywhere he went he could not get a job, he said. Life was hard then and lots of things have changed.

Some Relevant Books

Barnes, D., Britton, J. and Rosen, H., *Language, the Learner and the School*, Revised edition, Penguin, 1971

Jones, A. and Mulford, J. (Eds.), *Children Using Language*, O.U.P., 1971

Britton, J., *Language and Learning*, Penguin, 1972

Burgess, C. et al., *Understanding Children Writing*, Penguin, 1973

Rosen, C. and H., *The Language of Primary School Children*, Penguin, 1973

Rosen, H., *Language and Class*, Falling Wall Press, 1972